Helen Wheatley (ed.), *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 245, ISBN 978 1 84511 188 5, £17.99 (pb).

The aim of *Re-viewing Television History* is ambitious – to explore and reflect on British television historiography so as to see its present in the light of its past. Through a variety of critical and methodological approaches, case studies and interviews, both from personnel and members of the audience, this collection of articles offers a rich and well-documented picture of the medium from its infancy. Suitably organised into four parts – 'Debating the Canon', 'Textual Histories', 'Production and Institutions' and 'Audiences' – this book enables us to study the changing contextual modes of representation, production and reception over time. The editor Helen Wheatley underlines four key problems in British television history: the national issue, the general over-privileging of institutional perspectives, the gap between popular nostalgia and academic accounts of a televised past, and, last but not least, the problem of access to, not to mention survival of, the material.

'Debating the Canon' is a thought-provoking way of opening the book. Though the whole collection in itself will be useful for academics-cum-teachers, this first part offers great material of reflection for pedagogic use. By asking whether it is possible to construct a canon of television programmes and making a clear distinction between 'immanent reading' and 'textual historicism' – the latter being mostly favoured by researchers throughout the book – John Ellis raises many questions, further taken up by Jonathan Bignell and Máire Messenger Davies in the same section. The latter's study of two classic 1970s serials, *The Secret Garden* (1975) and *Clayhanger* (1976), provides a smooth transition to the second part, which focuses on textual (hi)stories while tackling the notion of 'quality television', as Catherine Johnson particularly emphasises at the beginning of this second part. By examining the relationship between broadcasting history and television history, both Su Holmes and Lez Cooke further explore the connection between production and representation. The latter's case study of *Second City First* (1973–78), produced by BBC English Regions Drama, also partly answers the problem of national specificity brought up by editor Helen Wheatley in her introduction. Despite the book's holistic approach to television history, however, the privileging of drama in several articles leaves little room for other genres, such as entertainment, though cited by several contributors as an area too scarcely covered by researchers in the now established field of television history.

Darrell Newton's contribution in Part Three makes an interesting exception in this respect as he tackles the shifting attitude of BBC television towards West Indian immigrants, whose first appearances occurred in entertainment programmes. The section entitled 'Production and Institutions' is the longest of the collection with three articles all based on further case studies, which, besides the example above, present the reader with analyses of primary material, either from oral history gathered from personnel recordings in the early years of the BBC (Emma Sandon) or from a Welsh perspective (Jamie Medhurst), which, again, addresses the question of regionality and nationality. The importance given to institutions in the collection could lead one into thinking that *Re-viewing Television History* is favouring the very over-privileging pinpointed by Wheatley as one of the major problems of television studies; but this is counterbalanced by the fact that all articles in Part Three are partly based on textual sources. By studying history programmes as a genre, Erin Bell and Ann Gray's contribution, also based on several interviews, then closes the section on an alternative way of understanding the relationship between history and television. In turn, their particular attention to television as a vehicle of mass-mediated knowledge to viewers proves a convenient transition to the last part of the book, dedicated to 'Audiences'.

Given the lack of first-hand material regarding past audiences, apart from the very useful Mass-Observation National Panel's notes, the ambition of this final section appears most difficult at first sight. Tim O'Sullivan's study of the domestication of television in the early years of the medium, as well as Henrik Örnebring's reassessment of the 1953 Coronation, nevertheless provide thorough analyses of the way members of the public reacted to two historical events and debunk some long-held conceptions of the audience as a homogenous whole. In her observation of the changing construction of the teenager through television programmes, Ann Sullivan continues to show the necessity of interconnecting the histories of television policy-making and social contexts, of texts and audiences, which is central to *Re-viewing Television History*.

Though not exhaustive, this book thus offers a well-documented and comprehensive (re-)view of British television history. Despite their being a bit anecdotal at times, the interviews with insiders of the media institutions will prove useful, as will the many detailed case studies. As to the ambition of the book to connect the past of British television with its present, however, the reader may feel a bit disappointed. The collection surely provides thought-provoking reflections on the present

of the medium in the digital age, though few in-depth comparisons are actually made. The necessity of media institutions to make archives accessible to the public and to the academic community is constantly underlined and the book itself is both a plea in this respect and an opportunity to make up for such a lack as it usefully revisits some neglected areas of the British television heritage.

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Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary 'High-End' TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 222, 4 illus., ISBN 978 0 7190 7311 3, £00.00 (pb).

Television scholarship has long wrestled with the difficult and often highly contentious term of 'quality' in relation to TV fiction. It is a debate that has rumbled on since the inception of the medium as questions of cultural worth mingle with a lingering assumption that television is somehow a bad object, historically offering a less stable image than the superior aesthetic of film. Attention in recent years focused on a limited range of US shows, where bold statements, like Peter Krämer's claim that 'American fictional television is now better than the movies', were heard. Audacious maybe, but contemporary television scholarship is acutely aware that something important has happened in television drama in the last ten years – and are keen to understand, in the words of Jonathan Storm, 'how did the wasteland get so beautiful'. Someone crucial to shaping this debate is Robin Nelson. In his latest book, *State of Play*, he offers not only a sagacious precis of what we understand quality television to be, but also a reading of contemporary television cultures and markets *in* and *through* the compositional principles and cultural values of selected dramas produced in either America or the United Kingdom between 1996 and 2006.

Just as past groundbreaking dramas like *Hill Street Blues* (1981–87) and *The Singing Detective* (1986) energised scholars, US series/serials like *The Sopranos* (1999–2006) inspire another generation striving to understand the nature of television as an aesthetic and cultural form. Under the microscope here is what Nelson calls 'high-end' TV dramas – a term borrowed from the industry to loosely describe programmes made with big budgets and high production values, and scheduled in primetime slots. Opting for this term may seem, to some at least, to side-step the more contentious 'quality' label, while for others I anticipate it will beg the question: if this is 'high-end', what does